by Ed Ives

# When Men Were Men And Deer Were Scarce

"It was easy to make a living in those days," a pioneer woman recalled in an Oregon Journal article of December 15, 1930. "The cougars would frequently drive the deer down to the beach," she continued . . .

> . . . and the deer would swim out beyond the breakers and not come ashore until daylight, when the cougars had gone back to the mountains. A person with a skiff could go out about daybreak and kill a deer in the water. There were deep bayous running in from the ocean. At low tide you could get a boatload of fine oysters, which were attached to the roots of the trees along the bayous. The trees along the shore were full of ducks. They had never been shot at, and you could literally pick them from the trees.

But such accounts of plentiful wildlife in the "good old days" were far outnumbered by Northwest pioneers' stories of hardship when game was scarce.

Deer are found in all areas of Washington that have suitable habitat, and early trappers and explorers who came to the region used deer as a principal food source. Deer were plentiful in a few areas, but most early accounts tell of a scarcity of big game except near bodies of water.

Pacific Northwest settlement and development depended greatly on the water pathways that eased access to the forested, hilly terrain along the coast. In 1792, Captain George Vancouver's expeditions probed Puget Sound to the tip of Mud Bay, near where Olympia stands today. The sight that met their wondering eyes was endless rows of trees that stair-stepped up from the water's edge to the top of the far-off hills. Fur trappers from the Hudson's Bay Co. were the next visitors to western Washington, in the 1820s, and they opened up routes along the many rivers.

Some of the earliest records of deer in eastern Washington come from the Okanogan country, where fur traders stationed at Fort Okanogan in the early 1800s mentioned hunting deer, but not as a regular meat source. During the winters, the traders were forced to subsist on horse meat. Deer were more plentiful by the middle of the century, and cowboys often foraged for venison during cattle drives up the Okanogan Valley.

A big drop in deer populations, as well as in cattle herds, came in the extremely severe winter of 1889-90. Deer were to remain scarce in the area for the next 30 to 40 years, with a 1911 Forest Service report estimating that there were only 50 deer in the entire lower Methow District.

A retired state wildlife agent, or game protector, as they were then called, recalled the early days in Pend Oreille County. In an interview published in the *Game Bulletin*, forerunner to *Washington Wildlife*, he said:

> People talk about all the deer we used to have over here, back around 1915. I hunted deer half the winter some of those years. Riding around on a saddle horse I'd see two, maybe three deer. They never heard of anyone seeing five deer in one day.

Some other species may have done all right in the 'teens and 'twenties, but for deer and elk, times were tough. Deer seasons were closed in several counties, including Okanogan County, during 1923 and 1924. In 1925 a statewide law was passed, limiting hunting to bucks only, although deer herds were actually starting to climb again.

There have been wide fluctuations in the number of deer and elk in Washington over the years. Man played a large part in these population shifts, particularly in the last century, but nature has often played a larger role. For many species, there can be no doubt that populations have reached their peaks and are leveling off or declining, but for other species, wide population swings may still occur.

For any species, there is a point beyond which the population cannot expand. It occurs when the species is occupying all the suitable range, in the density of numbers the land will support. This is known as the range's "carrying capacity." In eastern Washington, the carrying capacity is determined primarily by the amount of winter range.

Agricultural development has undoubtedly affected big-game populations in eastern Washington, but there is plenty of discussion about just how much. Some research indicates that early overgrazing and range fires were primarily responsible for the loss of available deer browse, while other studies blame the loss of habitat on other factors. The amount of winter range has been reduced drastically by agricultural encroachment, particularly where irrigated range land has been converted to orchards.

In western Washington, the range is quite different, and the animal types vary widely from those found in eastern counties. Black-tailed deer and most other west-side species thrived near the edges of burned or logged areas that increased with the coming of the white man.

Before white settlers came, many small Indian tribes wandered the forested expanses west of the Cascades. They discovered a basic relationship between forest and wildlife. Hunting was improved, because of an increase in big game, by occasional firing of parts of the forest to clear out the underbrush. This practice was to have a strong influence on forests of Douglas fir and other conifers.

The densely forested lands lining the navigable waterways of western Washington were stripped of their timber first, opening the way for settlements. Sailing ships had a great need for tall, straight spars for which the giant fir trees of the Northwest proved ideal, and as the demand for lumber grew, the holds of the sailing ships were filled with wood bound for California, the East Coast and even the Far East.

As the timber cutting pushed back farther and farther into the forested hills, new areas were opened for deer and elk to browse. At the same time, market hunters sought out big game for meat to fill the hearty appetites of the logging crews.

Without proper game management to control rampant exploitation of big game as a meat source, severe weather could push populations to critically low levels, with no let up in the "people pressure" to allow them time to recover. When the first management efforts began to take hold at about the turn of the century, many wildlife populations had hit bottom.

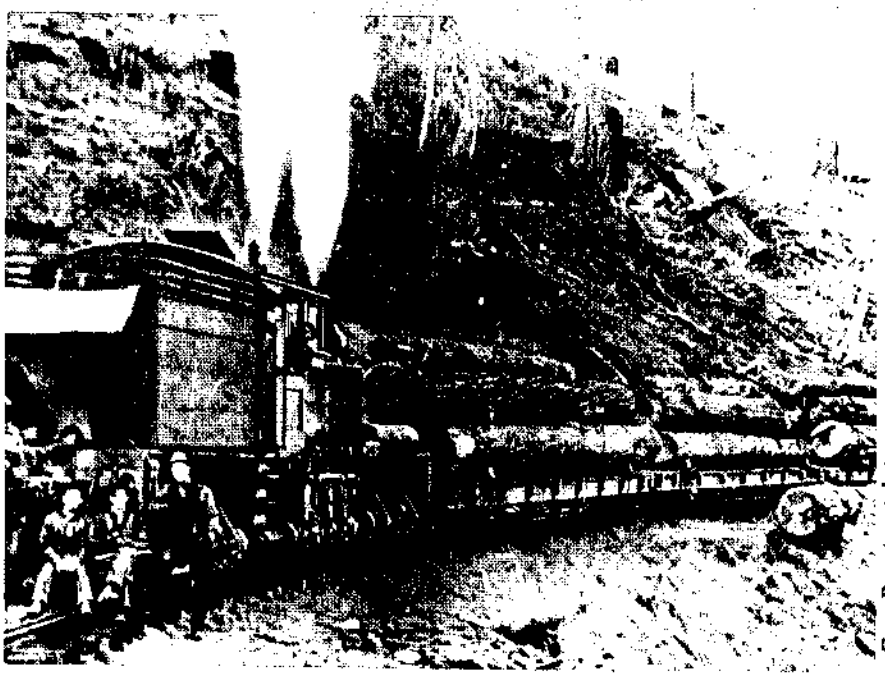
Once game management gained a firm foothold and the State Game Department came into being, game managers started examining the relationship between wildlife and forests. Deer increases in western Washington all occurred following logging or burning, which resulted in good range for several years. Reforestation of this land, however, crowded the deer out into farming areas or forced them to eat poorer quality browse. Only a limited number of forest plants are good for deer, and they must grow in the open to get enough sun to be nutritious. Forest regrowth shaded out these forage plants.

Most wildlife species prefer the edges of clear-cut areas, where good browse plants grow near the dense cover of the forest, offering both food and protection. In western Washington, black-tailed deer are the prime beneficiaries of the newly-logged areas, because they prefer browse plants to grass. Elk are similar to deer in their response to logging.

Modern forest management dictates leaving part of the land under growing-tree cover while cutting only the year's allotment — and this benefits the animals. If most forest land were clear-cut over a short period of time, deer and elk would have ideal conditions everywhere for a few years. Following this, however, young trees would shade out food plants on all the logged land, and deer and elk would be on short rations until the next cutting period. A sustained yield of trees also results in a sustained yield of deer.

While today's hunter does not experience the boom years of wildlife production that took place during the widespread clear-cutting before 1890, neither does he have the kind of bust years that resulted when extensive growth of mature timber caused animal populations to drop sharply. Now hunting opportunities are fairly constant from year to year, depending more on weather than any other single factor, although hunters should be aware of the stage of forest growth of their favorite hunting grounds. Such relatively even harvests were not the rule 60 years ago and could not be true today, except for the widespread practice of sustained-yield forest management.

The 1930s probably saw the greatest increase in deer of any time in the state's history. The Game Department conservatively estimates that deer numbers tripled during this time. The greatest increases during the decade were in eastern Washington, with the greatest growth on the west side of the Cascades coming a few years later — from about 1935 to 1945. In 1936, hunters reported a take of only 6,000 buck deer statewide, while in 1942, the total kill was close to 30,000 animals.



Game Department photo

***Typical logging scene: Hoquiam, around 1920.***

High-yield forestry has been practiced for a relatively short time, and there is still much to be learned about the most productive method of harvesting timber and its relationship to wildlife. We know that most species are more abundant near edges of clear-cuts, and small, irregularly shaped cuts provide more "edge" and, therefore, more habitat.

As the forest canopy closes over, the best plants for deer food decline in numbers and nutrition. Studies show that the most productive period for deer browse is during the first 12 years after seedling planting. Under modern forest practices, optimum conditions for deer will be limited to about a dozen years of the 40- to 60-year rotation cycle. After logging has occurred, a period of three to five years is needed for habitat conditions to become best for deer, and this hasn't changed, even though current forest practices are quite different from those of the past.

Historically, habitat conditions for deer gradually improved as the forest became mature and openings allowed some forage species to grow among the large trees. Under modern timber management, deer use can be extended throughout the rotation cycle by systematic thinning of tree stands, but conifer forests in the 25- to 40-year harvest cycle allow few desirable forage species a chance to grow. Recent studies indicate modern forest management practices are less desirable than the long cutting cycles and the cutting and burning practices of the past.

Cooperation between wildlife managers and forest managers continues to be important in achieving public understanding of high-yield forestry and its effects on hunting opportunities. The average sportsman doesn't understand the relationship between logging and wildlife, and sportsmen who don't understand will become increasingly frustrated as deer hunting areas remain good for shorter periods of time.

The fact that the rotation time between successive clear-cuts in an area will have been reduced to half its former length will be small comfort to the hunter who has to settle for half the productive hunting time in any one spot before moving on. □